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Who Are The Homeless? What is Homelessness? The Politics of Defining an Emerging Policy Issue

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness has emerged on the public agenda of economically advanced nations during the 1980's but not all such issues become recognized as "legitimate" social problems, worthy of serious policy consideration and the allocation of resources. The emergence of homelessness provides a good case study of the struggle over the definition of a new problem, particularly since homelessness is such a serious manifestation of poverty, more typical of less developed nations than of Canada or the United States.

Politics, not the "objective reality" of homelessness, determines its status on the public agenda. National political leaders and policy makers have an interest in defining the issue as narrowly as possible. To do otherwise, requires an appropriate policy and program response and implies criticism of existing policies and institutions. Local officials and social agencies, who have to face the problem first hand, have an interest in a fuller documentation and quantification and a broader definition of its nature and scope. They realize that local concern is insufficient and that a national recognition of homelessness as a social problem is needed to mobilize resources for effective policy and program implementation.

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WHO ARE THE HOMELESS? WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

THE POLITICS OF DEFINING AN EMERGING POLICY ISSUE

J. David Hulchanski

Poverty and the lack of shelter for the poor are well worn topics. Yet, during the 1980's, these issues have re-appeared on the public agenda of economically advanced countries.

The designation of 1987 as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (IYSH) by the United Nations has played an important role in raising the political profile of homeless people. [1] A U.N. focus by itself, however, would not be enough to give the issue the status it currently has. The economic climate of the 1980's has made this most visible form of poverty an increasingly common sight in the larger cities of North America and Europe.

Any new issue on the national public agenda requires broad agreement on its definition before effective action can be taken. But the terms homeless and homelessness are imprecise labels. If only those who have no shelter on any given night are to be counted, we have one number; if we take this number and add to it all those who have shelter which does not meet minimum health and safety standards, we not only have a much larger number of homeless but a much broader social problem, in the sense that much more needs to be "solved" than just providing temporary shelter to people without a roof over their heads on a given night.

Now that homelessness has emerged as a public issue, this paper examines its progress towards gaining the status of a "legitimate" social problem. After reviewing the politics of social problem definition, the response of two national governments, the United States and Canada, is examined. The third part reviews recent studies of the homeless by local government and social agencies in one major city, Metropolitan Toronto. The focus is on homelessness as a policy issue in economically advanced western nations and, in particular, Canada.

1. THE POLITICS OF DEFINING A "NEW" SOCIAL PROBLEM

The emergence of homelessness provides a good case study of the process by which a new social problem is defined and legitimized. For homelessness to be widely agreed upon social problem it is necessary, but far from sufficient, to have many homeless people.

If objective conditions in themselves are not adequate for deciding that a prevailing condition is a legitimate social problem, then what else is required? "What seems necessary," argues Tallman, "is an interplay between such conditions and the readiness of individuals or groups to perceive the situation as a problem and to take actions designed to bring changes." [2] A social problem is a unique configuration of events and behaviours, unique because some condition or situation is singled out for attention, and efforts to solve the problem influence the course of social change. This is the starting point for the political debate over policy options. Until then, the political debate is over whether or not there is a problem society ought to address.

Blumer identifies five stages that make up the "career" of a social problem: its emergence (the recognition that it exists); its legitimation (when the problem acquires broad social legitimacy); the mobilization of forces to begin to address the problem; the development of a plan of action; and the implementation of the plan. [3] In recent years homelessness has indeed attracted attention but it is far from being "legitimized" as a widely agreed upon social problem. "If the social problem fails to get legitimacy," Blumer argues, "it flounders and languishes outside of the arena of public action." [4]

While few would deny that there are indeed many people without a roof over their head on any given night, there is a great deal of disagreement over who should be defined as being "homeless" and what "homelessness" as a social problem actually is. Without an agreed upon definition, there is no legitimate social problem to be addressed and, as a result, there can be no agreed upon course of action -- the development of policy and programs. The question of a broadly endorsed definition, therefore, is much more than one of semantics. The way a problem is defined embodies a conception of what the causes are and what the solution ought to be.

At the root of the current debate we find differing perceptions about why homelessness exists. Underlying assumptions about the way society is and ought to be play a very large role in the way homeless people and the

issue of homelessness are perceived. The way the terms "homeless" and "homelessness" are used depends upon the reason for raising these issues in the first place (for example, to redress an income, housing, employment or other manifest socio-economic problem). In a similar fashion, a refusal to recognize homelessness as a social problem provides a clear indication of a different agenda.

"Social problems," as Blumer points out, "are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup."[5] As such, social problems are always the focal point for divergent and conflicting interests, intentions and objectives. Unless some substantial agreement develops, the issue will not move beyond the status of a "cause" of some special interest group. A cause which never gains societal legitimacy, can at best expect minor concessions from society if its proponent lobbys effectively. Only "legitimate" social problems, those few which have a successful "career," in Blumer's metaphor, can expect to be the focus of a policy leading to a coordinated course of action.

The current political debate over homelessness in economically advanced countries such as the U.S. and Canada is best understood as a contest over the policy status of this issue. [6] It could break into the arena of serious public consideration and public action, or it could be dismissed as insignificant and gradually blend into the accepted order of things. This explains why much of the literature and media coverage on homelessness, at this stage of its development as a public issue, is preoccupied with making numerical and normative claims.

There are indeed difficult, if not impossible, problems to be overcome in counting the homeless. This methodological problem, however, is minor compared to the broader conceptual problem of determining who ought to be counted and why. If only those who have no shelter on any given night are counted, we have one number; if we take this number and add to it all those who have shelter which does not meet minimum health and safety standards, we not only have a much larger number of homeless but a much broader social problem. It is broader in the sense that much more needs to be "solved" than just providing temporary shelter to people without a roof over their heads on a given night.

The same applies to the term homelessness. Any attempt to understand and then address homelessness must start by defining it. If the definition accepts homelessness as a housing problem, the response will focus largely on housing issues. If homelessness is perceived as a temporary problem, then the response need only be short term. If homelessness is seen as an individual's problem, then the response will focus on assisting the individual. These assumptions are found, either explicitly or implicitly, in any definition of homelessness.

In designating 1987 as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, the United Nations General Assembly, in 1982, defined two broad objectives. By 1987 nations were: "to achieve a measurable improvement in the actual living conditions of some of the world's poor"; and, between 1987 and 2000, "to refine, improve and implement, on a much broader scale, the approaches and techniques already demonstrated." [7]

The U.N.'s definition of the issue of homelessness places emphasis on both shelter and neighbourhoods -- housing problems, very broadly defined. The Director of the of IYSH for the U.N. Centre for Human Settlements (HABITAT), Ingrid Munro, points to the need to build desirable "human settlements" for a world which, by the year 2010, will be over 50% urbanized.

> "'Adequate shelter' must be recognized as being more than four walls and a roof: at the very least adequate shelter also includes security of tenure/occupation, and reasonable access to infrastructure, basic services and employment. Governments are therefore urged to recognize that 'human settlements' cannot be regarded as merely a sectoral activity in national development plans. Human settlements are the final product in terms of built/living environments of all sectoral activities." [8]

This is quite a challenge, given that about one billion people, a quarter of the world's population, are estimated to live in absolute poverty. Of these, the U.N. estimates that about 100 million have no shelter whatsoever while most of the remainder live in extremely inadequate shelter and unhealthy environments.

Another U.N. IYSH official, John E. Cox, speaking to the Canadian real estate industry, put the problem more dramatically by focusing on the self-interest of his audience. He asked:

> "Can you visualize the enormous risk of social breakdown, political upheaval, economic instability and even civil violence if we fail to deal with these needs? And let us be under no illusion -- if these needs are not met the fall-out will not be just a developing countries issue. And I repeat, we are only talking of a 15 or 20 year time frame." [9]

It is with these concerns in mind that the U.N. designated a special year to move human settlement issues higher on national agendas.

"Most decision makers," Cox notes, "perceive the human settlements sector, and particularly housing for the poor and disadvantaged, as mainly a social-cum-welfare sector in which the government provides costly service to the least advantage members of the population." [10] The U.N. hopes to document the "immense contribution which the human settlement sector can make to the overall economic development of a country" so as to then allocate resources more appropriately. [11] As part of the IYSH each country is being urged to draw up a comprehensive shelter strategy that would direct activities towards improving housing and neighbourhoods for all by the year 2000.

A national co-ordinated course of action -- a policy and an appropriate range of programs -- must be developed if conditions are not to deteriorate further. Few governments, however, are willing to accept the U.N.'s definition of the problem, the U.N's IYSH goals and objectives, the U.N.'s decision to legitimize homelessness as serious social problem, and, finally, the U.N.'s attempt to define and implement a plan of action. This is clear in the case of two countries with the resources necessary to solve the problem by the year 2000 if they chose to do so.

2. TWO NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS: THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

The literature on homelessness as a policy issue has failed thus far to make a crucial distinction between the politics of legitimizing the problem in developed and less developed countries. In less developed countries it is relatively easy and, in most cases, an accepted fact that homelessness and poor neighbourhood environments are a "legitimate" national problem. In many developed countries, however, it is very difficult for national officials to go beyond vague statements about the existence of poverty. For a national official to publicly accept that homelessness is pervasive and affects an increasing number of people implies that something should be done about it.

With homelessness widespread and increasingly visible in the U.S. and Canada, the struggle over how to define the problem for policy and program purposes has therefore begun. Ranking just one step away from denial is the use of an extremely narrow definition, one which usually blames the victims. This at least makes the problem appear to be relatively small and limited to discrete populations and locations. Such a definition implies that national officials need not allocate much effort or resources. A narrow definition effectively serves the same policy function as denial.

It is relatively easy for officials to use a narrow definition because the problem is not as extensive, visible or dramatic as in less developed countries. A fairly clear image of the problem results when the homeless of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia are mentioned. A less clear image is produced when the homeless in the U.S. and Canada are mentioned. If conditions in North America are to be compared with those of Asia, there is no real problem. North Americans can sit back and be proud of what they have achieved.

An important distinction which has not been clearly raised is that the definition of homelessness must be different and relative to the general conditions prevailing in a particular country. Defining homelessness as a social problem is similar to the controversy over defining poverty. Is poverty in North America to be defined as the lack of the minimum food necessary for survival (the 19th century subsistence concept)? By defining rather complex "poverty lines" we have recognized that to be poor in North America is different from being poor in third world countries. Townsend's concept of relative deprivation is closer to the way North American's tend to define poverty:

> "Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual of family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities." [12]

The debate over defining homelessness is similar. Is the "problem" the absolute lack of any shelter, or does it also include relative homelessness, the lack of adequate and affordable housing appropriate to the size and needs of the household in a decent environment? An example of such a "relative definition" is the one proposed for Canada by the Centre for Human Settlements in Vancouver.

> "Homelessness in Canada is the absence of a continuing or permanent home over which individuals or family groups have personal control and which provides the essential needs of shelter, privacy and security at an affordable cost, together with ready access to social and economic public services." [13]

As a national issue in North America, the debate is a political one over the nature of the policy issue called homelessness: is homelessness to be defined narrowly, in absolute terms, as the lack of a roof; or is it to be defined more broadly, in relative terms, as the lack of a permanent, secure, affordable home in a decent environment? The following examination of the debate in the U.S. and Canada demonstrates the extent to which the national governments are attempting to limit the issue to the former.

The United States Government

The 1984 study of homelessness by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is an example of the use by a government agency of a very narrow definition. According to the HUD study:

> "'Homelessness' refers to people in the 'streets' who, in seeking shelter, have no alternative but to obtain it from a private or public agency. Homeless people are distinguished from those who have permanent shelter even though that shelter may be physically inadequate. They

are also distinguished from those living in overcrowded conditions." [14]

The homeless "in the streets" are the problem of homelessness, and nothing else. In case the above definition is not clear enough, the HUD study further elaborates by defining a person homeless if his or her "nighttime residence" is in an emergency shelter or "in the streets, parks, subways, bus terminals, railroad stations, airports, under bridges or aqueducts, abandoned buildings without utilities, cars, trucks, or any other public or private space that is not designated for shelter." [15] In general, according to HUD, people who "have a roof over their heads...are not homeless."

The HUD study was undertaken shortly after the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) of the Department of Health and Human Services reported, based on estimates provided by advocacy groups, that as many as 2 million may be homeless nationwide. The NIMH developed a working definition of a homeless person as "anyone who lacks adequate shelter, resources, and community ties." [16] Prior to the NIMH estimate, the Community for Creative Non-Violence, a Washington, D.C. based advocacy group and shelter provider, estimated that there were 2 to 3 million homeless in the U.S. [17]

The media coverage spawned by the increasingly visible nature of the problem as well as the estimates claiming that more than one percent of Americans are homeless, was politically embarrassing in view of budget cuts to housing and social welfare programs. The Reagan Administration has, therefore, an interest in defining the problem as narrowly as possible. HUD's response, based not only on a narrow definition but also on a now widely challenged method of counting, resulted in a downward revision of the estimated number of homeless by more than 80%, to the 250,000 to 350,000 range. [18] HUD delivered on an analytic framework President Reagan set when he finally conceded in 1984 that there always have been some homeless people "even in the best of times" but suggested that we are only more aware of it now and that, in any case, many are homeless "by choice." The Reagan Administration's response was the establishment of a Task Force on the Homeless, something Time magazine described as "a kind of Government baglady that casts about Federal agencies looking for spare clothes, tents or unused Government buildings." [19]

When asked by a Congressional subcommittee to review this debate, the General Accounting Office at least described the problem in more realistic terms.

"In summary, no one knows how many homeless people there are in America because of the many difficulties reported by organizations which have tried to locate and count them. As a result, there is considerable disagreement

> over the size of the homeless population. However, there is agreement in the studies we reviewed and among shelter providers, researchers, and agency officials we interviewed that the homeless population is growing. Current estimates of annual increases of the growth vary between 10 and 38 percent. The homeless population is also changing and includes an increasing number of the mentally ill as well as a younger population in their mid-30's, and more women, children, and minorities." [20]

The debate in the U.S. over numbers and definitions continues. It is clearly much more than a numerical and methodological debate. It is essentially a public policy debate over what will be become the "legitimate" definition of homelessness requiring a public response.

The Canadian Government

Canadians are continually reminded by politicians and housing officials that they have one of the best housing stocks in the world and that, on average, they are among the best housed people in the world. When the National Housing Act was amended in 1973, introducing a range of new social housing programs, the federal housing minister affirmed that:

> "It is the fundamental right of every Canadian to have access to good housing at a price he can afford. Housing is not simply an economic commodity that can be bought and sold according to the vagaries of the market, but a social right." [21]

It was, therefore, a shock to many Canadians when food lines and homeless people became increasingly visible in our larger cities over the past decade. The number of Canadians living below the poverty line in 1985 (3.9 million) was higher than in 1979 (3.7 million). [22] Hunger and homelessness were supposed to be third world problems, and, in some cases, problems found in U.S. inner city slums. But not in Canada! During the 1980's, however, community groups and social agencies throughout the country began to initiate new programs (such as the food banks) and to advocate greater government action on the inter-related issues of poverty, unemployment and housing. [23]

Unlike the U.S., where national officials have been forced to say something about the problem and initiate token actions, the federal government has yet to respond to the issue. There has been no Canadian government

study of homelessness. The word cannot even be found in any of the recent major housing policy documents of the federal government. These include:

* the January 1985 Consultation Paper on Housing;

* the June 1985 housing report of the Task Force on Program Review (the Neilson Committee), Housing Programs in Search of Balance; and

* the December 1985 announcement of federal housing policy, A National Direction for Housing Solutions. [24]

Yet, even using a very conservative definition of housing need, CMHC estimates that, as of the early 1980's, more than 500,000 renter households cannot afford physically adequate and uncrowded accommodation and nearly 200,000 homeowners in Canada have serious housing affordability problems. [25] Despite this huge need for good quality affordable housing, the federal government asserts that "the housing market has worked well in Canada" [26] and that, in terms of social housing programs, "efforts are required to reduce, where possible, the magnitude of on-going expenditures."[27]

The Canadian government's only role in the IYSH appears to be the allocation of funds to several groups to carry out research and sponsor a national conference. In formally announcing some of this funding, Stewart McInnes, the federal minister responsible for housing, did admit, apparently with some reluctance, that there are homeless people in Canada.

> "Granted. Things aren't perfect here. We do have poverty. There are some of our fellow human beings who are without shelter. But that shouldn't prevent us from trying to sell our way of life. Our self-criticism is extreme. [28]

This shows how difficult it is for some Canadians to admit that a problem as severe as homelessness exists in Canada. Such an admission not only carries an implied criticism of the social welfare and housing systems it also implies that a course of action should be devised.

Rather than stating the dimensions of the problem in Canada and the actions his government was considering, McInnes urged that Canada's role in the homelessness issue be one of teaching other nations about Canada's achievement. He urged his academic audience not to be "reluctant to praise our way of life, to promote our kind of society, our style of government." In terms of helping less developed countries:

"I submit to you that, if we aren't prepared to go into the developing nations of this world and sing the praises of capitalism and the business ethic, we are denying these people the most useful thing we have to give them -- a way of life, which encourages and rewards initiative and self-reliance, and allows for personal freedom and development." [29]

3. LOCAL INITIATIVES: THREE EXAMPLES FROM TORONTO

In the absence of leadership from national government in the U.S. or Canada, local government as well as community based organizations and agencies have focused attention on homeless people and homelessness as a social problem. This section looks at Metropolitan Toronto, as an example of how recent studies define the issue. Three significant studies were published in 1983 by: the Metropolitan Government, the major social research agency, and a group of inner city social service professionals. Though each has a different scope and purpose, together they provide reliable factual information on the nature and scope of the problem as well as the outlines of a sophisticated analytic framework. This helped legitimize the problem in Toronto and all levels of government, except the federal, have begun to address it. Local studies such as these have placed homelessness on the national agenda.

Metro Toronto's Study of the Homeless

While conducting a detailed study of housing need in Metropolitan Toronto during the early 1980's, the Metro Toronto Planning Department realized that traditional survey methods missed people with no fixed address. To supplement their quantitative survey, a qualitative survey of hostels and social service agencies was carried out to estimate the magnitude of need among people with no permanent shelter and to analyze this need according to characteristics such as age, household type and income. The study, titled No Place To Go, [30] was carried out at a time when homelessness was becoming a high profile public concern in Toronto. It effectively helped inform the emerging debate by providing carefully documented information on homeless people.

The study concluded that there were at least 3,400 people without a permanent address in Metropolitan Toronto and that the profile of the homeless "is contrary to the popular image of this group as being made up of men mainly from a 'skid row' lifestyle." [31] Individuals under 25 comprised 36% of the homeless in hostels and the number of families and single women were found to be increasing. Many people in the hostels had previously lived in rooming houses in the inner city neighbourhoods. The report concluded that:

> "Based on the findings of the study, homelessness is an increasing problem in Metropolitan Toronto, affected by

> multiple causes interacting with each other, i.e., a decline in affordable rental stock (especially rooming houses) in centrally located areas, low vacancy rates in the rental market, high levels of unemployment, and provincial policies regarding de-institutionalization. The multiple contributing causes dictate that a multi-faceted approach must be employed to develop solutions." [32]

The homeless were defined as people without a fixed or permanent address. The figure of 3,400 consisted of approximately 1,600 people in hostels and 1,800 clients known to selected social service agencies, who were not staying in hostels. Homelessness was not defined, though it is clear that the authors assumed that the issue was limited to homeless individuals. This is similar to the narrow problem definition of the HUD study. There was no mention of the potential size of the "at risk" population or of people living in extremely bad quality housing. There was passing mention that hostel and agency staff estimated that 70% to 90% of their clients who do manage to secure permanent housing, were unsatisfactorily housed due to the poor physical condition of the accommodation. [33]

The Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto

In contrast to the Metropolitan Toronto study, People Without Homes: A Permanent Emergency, by the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, focused on the nature and scale of homelessness rather than on homeless individuals. The issue was defined as the overall crisis in affordable housing for low income people. This broader approach emphasized, in particular, the long-term nature of the problem.

> "People with low incomes in Toronto are undergoing a crisis in affordable housing. For them the shelter crisis cannot simply be called an 'emergency.' It is a long-term state, a permanent emergency." [34]

The report argues that there is no single approach to solving this long-term problem but that a "coordinated set of strategies offering a range of long-term housing options" must be developed. Short term measures were not seen as the answer to this long-term problem:

> "The provision of adequate shelter is a problem which defies easy solution. The infusion of short-term money will do little to ease the long-term problem of providing affordable housing for low income people." [35]

The Social Planning Council, an independent, non-governmental social research agency, financed by the United Way, is free of political limitations. Their definition of the problem was not limited to housing: "we are concerned about people's ongoing need for affordable accommodation, an adequate living income, and a range of support services." Policy makers were urged to "address the real issues rather than the symptoms of these problems." [36]

The Single Displaced Persons Project

A group of directors, board members and staff of social service agencies and clergy of inner city Toronto churches wrote a report on the homeless "to offer a deeper and better-informed analysis of homelessness and to propose the provision of long-term, supportive housing as an alternative strategy to the provision of emergence shelter." [37] This group, the Single Displaced Persons' Project, not only has first hand experience with the problem but, as a self-established informal organization, is free of any institutional constraints.

The report offers a definition of homelessness focused on those characteristics necessary for someone to have a "home" rather than just a roof over their head.

> "Homelessness is the condition of low-income people who cannot find adequate, secure housing at a price they can afford. The most obvious element of homelessness is the lack of housing; but just as 'home' is more than physical shelter, 'homelessness' includes a lack of this base for the rest of life's activities. 'Home' is associated with personal identity, family, relationships, a role in the community, privacy and security, and the possession of personal property. Homelessness or the lack of a home affects all these areas of an individual's life." [38]

The mention of "secure" housing extends the definition beyond those who currently lack shelter. There are many more trapped in a cycle of having and losing housing.

The lack of appropriate, permanent, affordable housing is seen as the result of a complex social and economic dynamic. It is more than a situation experienced by individuals. "The homeless are at the bottom of the social, economic and housing system in Canada, with structural barriers frustrating their efforts to break out of that position." [39] The authors

note that there is a tendency to seek explanations in individual personal problems which can be "diagnosed" and "cured" and that the homeless are then categorized (as alcoholic, handicapped, lazy, or even "socially retarded"), thereby avoiding analysis of the broader socio-economic context. Unlike other studies, the report not only offers a definition of homelessness, but complains about the way the "housing problem" has been defined.

Some aspects of housing have been defined as legitimate "problems" for many decades, and a variety of policies and programs have been implemented. According to Blumer, once a problem obtains legitimacy (the second stage), the third stage, the process of mobilization to action, depends upon "how the problem comes to be defined, how it is bent in response to awakened sentiment, how it is depicted to protect vested interests, and how it reflects the play of strategic position and power." [40] All of this depends upon social values. According to the Single Displaced Persons' Project:

> "We tend to view housing as a consumer item to be purchased by those who can afford it or as an investment option to maximize profit. In responding to the homeless, we have tended to offer short-term shelter at minimal cost. Without a shift in our values regarding housing, homelessness will persist as a social phenomenon and we can expect further increases in the numbers of homeless men and women in our cities. To counteract this trend, housing should be considered a basic right. 'Housing' should also be understood to mean more than simple shelter." [41]

Unless the "problem" is defined in this fashion, short-term housing such as shelters and transitional residences are the likely response to homelessness. "A shift in our values regarding housing demands a similar shift in the priorities of governments, churches, and social services...moving beyond 'crisis' or 'emergency' responses to provide long term housing that can become 'home'." [42]

The report recommends "Supportive housing" situations, defined as "a long term residence that is small enough to encourage mutual support among the residents and has staff that are enablers of the residents' goals." In this combined housing and social service option, "individuals are better able to cope with personal problems, to make appropriate use of support services, and to decrease or even eliminate their dependency on the social service system. [43]

4. THE FUTURE OF HOMELESSNESS AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

In economically advanced nations, what is homelessness? What is the nature and extent of this social problem?

Since emerging as an issue about ten years ago, there should be--though it appears there is not -- agreement on a definition of homelessness. There is evidence that at the local level, as we see in the case of Toronto, there is a great deal of consensus about homelessness as a "legitimate" social problem. There is also evidence of movement into the third and fourth stages of Blumer's typology: the mobilization of forces and the development of a plan of action. This is not the case for with the federal government in the U.S. and Canada. Without national recognition of homelessness as a social problem, there can be no mobilization of the resources required to implement effective solutions.

From a review of the various reports on homelessness, a number of common themes become apparent. These contribute to an understanding of the nature and scope of the problem.

It is a National Problem. What is generating the problem? Homelessness occurs in countries with very high living standards and with relatively sophisticated institutional arrangements. It is clear that larger processes are involved. Homelessness is linked to macro-economic trends, national policies and programs (or the lack of appropriate policies and programs), and social welfare and housing program funding levels. It is not generated at the municipal level nor can it be solved at that level. The overall question of inequality in all its manifestations is at the root of the problem. It is not simply a local problem caused by some unique local circumstances involving a few "down and out" people. There is much evidence to the contrary.

It is a Long-Term Problem. Homelessness is not going to recede by itself. There is too much evidence of continuing loss of the affordable housing stock, of the impact of displacement on lower income people, and of long term high unemployment. Budget deficits and the size of the public debt mean that there can be no quick solution, even if such a solution were to exist.

It is a Complex Multi-Dimensional Problem. It is too convenient to reduce any social problem to the ultimate social problem -- poverty. Such reductionism does not provide a useful framework for policy formulation. Unless real redistribution of income is on the national agenda and there are prospects for decreasing the gap between rich and poor, defining homelessness as a problem of poverty is nothing more than a tautology. But what do we do with this definition? Homelessness involves a number of inter-related factors, primarily unemployment, displacement from housing, deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and the inadequacy of social benefits. Poverty does not cause unemployment, displacement, deinstitutionalization or inadequately funded social programs! Homelessness is a multi-dimensional problem requiring coordinated policies and programs to redress inadequacies in social services, income support programs, and affordable housing.

It Requires a Political Committment. Change only comes about when there is the political will to devise and initiate a course of action focused on an agreed upon problem. In a democracy, a consensus must emerge before an issue becomes a "legitimate" social problem for public policy to address. Until then, the issue remains within the domain of special interest groups and political agitators. As such, it is still an "emerging issue" which, in fact, may never emerge as a recognized problem within the domain of the mainstream of society. Academic studies and government reports will not, by themselves, achieve very much.

It is a political process which selects those phenomenon in a society which are to be considered as a social problem. It is here that fundamental values, or paradigms, or world views, colour the choice and how it is considered.

In the case of homelessness, generally right of center political values lead to a narrow definition of the problem, virtually denying its existence. Narrowly defined, homelessness is a temporary problem that reflects an individual's failure to achieve and maintain a minimally adequate standard of living. It is assumed to be the fault of the person who is homeless, or at least the fault of some temporary problem which has led to a few people becoming homeless.

Generally left of center political values lead to a much broader definition of homelessness. It is viewed as a dramatic manifestation of serious structural problems in the economy and the social service and housing systems. Rather than blaming the homeless or some temporary economic aberration for the fact that many people lack adequate shelter, the cause is seen to be deeply embedded in the political and economic institutions. From this perspective, placing an emphasis on the problems of the homeless themselves not only diverts attention from broader policy issues but also reinforces the negative labelling of homeless individuals.

Will Homelessness Become a "Legitimate" Social Problem? There is a final and important aspect of the career of a social problem: it can be sidetracked at any time, recede from public notice and become a part of the accepted scheme of things. The 1960's concern for the elimination of poverty is a case in point. Poverty remains but its status as a high profile social problem which society must address has not. Once the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless is over, we will see how well homelessness survives without the benefit of the legitimacy conferred by a high profile U.N. campaign. What kind of "career" as a social problem will homelessness have after 1987 in economically advanced countries? Will it progress through the ranks, culminating in the implementation of a solution? If so, which definition of the problem will become the legitimate one? If it is a narrow definition, we will likely see more and improved temporary shelters for the growing numbers of homeless. If it is a broader definition, we will likely see less need for temporary shelters as our social and housing programs effectively prevent people from falling into such desperate circumstances.

NOTES

1. See: Ingrid Munro, "International Year of Shelter for the Homeless," Cities: the International Quarterly on Urban Policy 4 (1987), 5-12; Yvo de Boer, "The International Year of Shelter for the Homeless: Aims and National and International Action," Cities: the International Quarterly on Urban Policy 2 (1985), 340-349; and John E. Cox, "Objectives of the UN International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (IYSH) - 1987," Ekistics 307 (1984), 284.

2. Irving Tallman, Passion, Action, and Politics: A Perspective on Social Problems and Social-Problem Solving (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1976), 31.

3. Herbert Blumer, "Social Problems as Collective Behavior," Social Problems 18 (1971), 298-306.

4. Ibid., 303.

5. Ibid., 298.

6. For a review of the evolution of the political debate over homelessness in the United States, see: Mark J. Stern, "The Emergence of the Homeless as a Public Problem," Social Science Review 58 (1984), 291-301; and Kim Hopper and Jim Hamberg, "The Making of America's Homeless: From Skid Row to New Poor, 1945-1984," in Rachel G. Bratt, Chester Hartman and Ann Meyerson (eds.), Critical Perspectives on Housing (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 12-40.

7. International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (Nairobi, Kenya: United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (HABITAT), no date), 2.

8. Munro, "International Year of Shelter for the Homeless," 6.

9. John E. Cox, "Statement by Mr. John E.Cox, Director, International Year of Shelter for the Homeless to the Canadian Real Estate Association, 23 October, Ottawa, Canada," (Nairobi, Kenya: United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, mimeo, 1984), 3.

10. Cox, "Objectives of the UN International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (IYSH) - 1987," 284.

11. Ibid.

12. Peter Townsend, Poverty in the United Kingdom (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 1. See also: Peter Townsend, "A Theory of Poverty and the Role of Social Policy," in Martin Loney, David Boswell and John Clarke (eds.), Social Policy and Social Welfare: A Reader (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1983), 58-82.

13. H. Peter Oberlander and Arthur L. Fallick, Shelter or Homes? A Contribution to the Search for Solutions to Homelessness in Canada, A Progress Report (Vancouver: The Centre for Human Settlements, University of British Columbia, 1987), 7.

14. United States, Department of Housing and Urban Development, A Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters (Washington, D.C.: HUD, Office of Policy Development and Research, 1984), 7.

15. Ibid.

16. Cited in: United States General Accounting Office, Homelessness: A Complex Problem and the Federal Response (Washington, D.C.: GAO, 1985), 4.

17. Mary Ellen Hombs and Mitch Synder, Homelessness in America: A Forced March to Nowhere (Washington, D.C.: The Community for Creative Non-Violence, 2nd ed., 1983), xvi.

18. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 18. For a critical review of the HUD study, see: Chester Hartman, "[U.S. Congress] Testimony on A Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters," in Jon Erickson and Charles Wilhelm (eds.), Housing the Homeless (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers, Center for Urban Policy Research, 1986), 150-155. For a defense of the HUD study, see: S. Anna Kondratas, "A Strategy for Helping America's Homeless," The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, No. 431, May 6, 1985, 3-6. Excerpts have been republished in Erickson and Wilhelm, Housing the Homeless, 144-149.

19. "Coming in from the Cold: A Deep Freeze Exposes the Plight of Up to 2 Million Homeless," Time, February 4, 1985, 23.

20. U.S. General Accounting Office, 12-13.

21. Canada, Housing of Commons Debates, March 15, 1973, 2257.

22. Canada, National Council of Welfare, Progress Against Poverty, (Ottawa: the Council, 1986), Table 1, p.2.

23. In British Columbia, for example, food banks began to appear in 1981. By 1986 over forty food banks were helping about 70,000 people per month. See: Social Planning and Review Council of British Columbia, Food Bank Users: A Profile of the Hungry in B.C. (Vancouver: SPARC, 1986).

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1985); and Canada, Minister Responsible for C.M.H.C., A National Direction for Housing Solutions (Ottawa: C.M.H.C., 1985).

25. Consultation Paper on Housing, 10.

26. Ibid., 20.

27. Housing Programs in Search of Balance, 21.

28. Stewart McInnes, "Speaking Notes for the Minister, Official Opening, United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (HABITAT) Information Office for North America and the Caribbean, York University, Toronto, March 3, 1987," 3.

29. Ibid., 5.

30. Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department, No Place to Go, A Study of Homelessness in Metropolitan Toronto: Characteristics, Trends and Potential Solutions (Toronto: Metropolitan Toronto, 1983).

31. Ibid., 36.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 24.

34. Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, People Without Homes: A Permanent Emergency (Toronto: SPC, 1983), ii (emphasis in the original).

35. Ibid., iii.

36. Ibid., 2, 10.

37. Bill Bosworth, Erich Freiler, et al., The Case for Long-Term, Supportive Housing (Toronto: Single Displaced Persons' Project, 1983), 5.

38. Ibid., 7.

39. Ibid., 8.

40. Blumer, "Social Problems as Collective Behavior," 304.

41. Bosworth, Freiler, et al., The Case for Long-Term, Supportive Housing, 20-21.

42. Ibid., 21.

43. Ibid., 21-22.